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Manuscript Cover Page

Title: **Researching death: methodological reflections on the management of critical distance**

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## **Researching death: methodological reflections on the management of critical distance**

### **Abstract**

As an academic subject of study, death has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Yet unlike other topics in the social sciences, death occupies a rather unique status as a research topic. A universal concern that affects everyone, this paper asks whether it is therefore *ever* possible to achieve a scholarly ‘critical distance’ from studying a place or people associated with death. Drawing on the author’s experience of undertaking an ethnographic study of a London cemetery, the paper reflexively recounts the ways in which the author managed their own critical distance both in and outside of the field. The paper concludes that it is somewhat unrealistic to suggest that a scholar researching death can maintain a complete sense of detachment in light of their awareness of the mortal human condition.

Key Words: Critical distance, death, ethnography, reflexivity.

### **Introduction**

A long standing and ongoing debate in social research, the concept and management of scholarly detachment - particularly in qualitative research - is closely entwined with discussions about neutrality and whether a researcher and what they produce can be unbiased (see Cohen, 2000; Hammersley and Gomm, 1997). In ethnographic circles discussion about the role, presence and status of the researcher is not unusual

as the malleability of the social research process has long been recognised, with the researcher typically (and intentionally) included and accounted for in dissemination (Coffey, 1999). Beyond ethnographers, over the years the practice of deliberately including the researcher in accounts has expanded as part of a 'reflexive turn' within the social sciences. It is within the growing tradition of what Bloor and Wood have termed "intellectual honesty" (2006: 147) in social research that this paper is located. Its aim is to critically reflect on whether or not it is possible to maintain a sense of critical distance when researching a place and people associated with death, by making transparent my experience of the challenges of navigating and negotiating a sense of scholarly detachment during a study of a cemetery.

### **Death as an academic subject**

Since the early beginnings of anthropological exploration of death in 'exotic' cultures (for example Radcliffe-Brown, 1948), social scientific inquiry into death has grown significantly in recent years, reflected in the publication of a range of textbooks and readers (see for example Earle et al., 2008; Howarth, 2007; Kellehear, 2009). Empirical investigation into death has also gained a sizeable foothold thanks in part to the work of medical sociologists and studies of end of life (see Lawton, 2000; Seymour, 2001). Research into the experience of bereavement has also grown (see Valentine, 2008).

Within this body of literature, it has been widely recognised that death is a potentially sensitive subject to explore (Johnson and Clarke, 2003; Lee, 1993; Liamputtong,

2007). However, death is more than this. As one of the very few universal features of life (Bauman, 1992), it occupies a rather extraordinary status as an academic topic of focus. Unlike other social issues that capture the imagination of social scientists (such as gender and sexuality, crime, ethnicity and so on) death is something from which *no one* is exempt. Everyone is an ‘insider’ when it comes to death; as Professor Douglas Davies noted in his introduction to a plenary session at the Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal Conference in September 2009: “We are *all* participants in mortality, not just observers.”

This universal reach necessarily includes those researchers working in this field of inquiry. Noted in one of the earlier academic studies of death, anthropologist Robert Hertz questioned whether death could *ever* be scrutinised as a scholarly topic owing to its uniquely personal nature:

We all believe we know what death is because it is a familiar event and one that arouses intense emotion. It seems both ridiculous and sacrilegious to question the value of that intimate knowledge and to wish to apply reason to a subject where only the heart is competent (Hertz 1960 [1907]: 27).

Over one hundred years after Hertz pondered this question, accounts from researchers about the potential impact of studying death have contributed to the aforementioned growth in reflexivity in social research (see Hockey, 2007; Howarth, 1993; Rowling, 1999; Valentine, 2007; Watts, 2008). However, reflexive accounts by researchers in this field are still relatively small in quantity compared to the number of people now examining death as an intellectual pursuit. On the one hand, perhaps this is

understandable in light of pressures on researchers to be seen as producers of high quality outputs (see Sparkes, 2007) and the way in which deliberate disclosure of the challenges faced in producing research can leave the researcher vulnerable to accusations of prejudice and partiality (Bryman and Burgess, 1994).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, an unwillingness to share details about the research process is by no means unique to those researching death; there are numerous tensions about the ways in which behind-the-scenes activity is divulged in research dissemination (Blackman, 2007). In the case of studying death however, whether or not to disclose behind-the-scenes activity (or acknowledge the researcher's presence in research outputs) raises important questions about the extent to which the researcher removes themselves from their research narrative, while *knowing full well* that the subject under investigation will be one that they will personally encounter eventually – if not already.

This paper draws on my experience of conducting a study in a cemetery to examine the extent to which a researcher can intellectually detach his or her self when researching in this area. A four year collaboratively funded project<sup>2</sup> based at the City of London Cemetery and Crematorium (CLCC) in Newham, East London,<sup>3</sup> the research from which the paper originates was an ethnographic study of the site and the groups of people associated with it, namely visitors, staff and the local community. The principle methods of data generation were participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which will be used to structure the latter sections of this paper. Over 100 people were interviewed for the research and approximately 60 days in a six month period were spent overtly and covertly observing visitors in the site and occasionally participating in their activities, for example, in carrying watering cans for people tending graves, or directing people around the grounds.

It was during this piece of research that I began to question my own sense of ‘critical distance’. Reflecting on these queries, this paper provides a firsthand account of the challenges I encountered when trying to maintain a sense of scholarly detachment from the data and analysis I was generating. It does not propose to add to well worn discussions about objectivity/subjectivity or insider/outsider status in social research, nor does it claim to be one of a kind within an expanding tradition of reflexive practice. Rather, it is a contribution to the growing trend towards sharing good/bad practice (see Hallowell et al, 2005) and promoting transparency in social research (Anfara et al, 2002) through discussing examples of the issues I faced in this particular project. After providing an overview of literature related to this discussion, the paper is structured around the sequential course of the research process, that is ‘before’, ‘during’, and ‘after’ the field.

### **The tool of reflexivity**

Although the concept of reflexivity will not be novel to readers of this journal, it is important to briefly outline its purpose in relation to disclosing accounts of research such as this. Typically associated with qualitative research, being reflexive,

involves honesty and openness about how, where and by whom the data were collected and locates the researcher as a participant in the dynamic interrelationship of the research process. (Ryan and Golden, 2006: 288).

As a tool through which researchers can recognise and reflect on the assumptions and expectations they bring with them to the research process (Hubbard et al. 2001; Rolls and Relf, 2006), reflexivity is also, as Knowles (2006) puts it, a way of accounting for 'emotional baggage.' More than a confessional opportunity however, reflexive practice enables social scientists to be transparent about their research in a methodologically rigorous way (Guilleman and Gillam, 2004). It also provides those engaged in research with the chance to critically unpack successes and failures in the field so that mistakes can be shared, accomplishments celebrated and good practice built upon (see for example Letherby, 2002).

My own desire to be reflexive stems from my experience as both an undergraduate and postgraduate sociology student, during which time I received considerable instruction in social research methods. While I was a doctoral student I drew on this training to teach research methods to sociology undergraduates myself, conveying the message I had learnt from my own schooling that to be a competent researcher meant striving to be as accurate and thorough as possible when generating, analysing and disseminating data (Kleinmann and Copp, 1993). While teaching this in undergraduate seminars as a doctoral student my own corresponding experience of undertaking empirical research was, however, generating a multitude of questions about what this *actually* meant in practice. How could it be achieved? Was it even possible when researching an issue/experience (ie. death, bereavement) that I knew I would have to face at some point in my life? Did being accurate and thorough mean I was to be a remote observer/analyser who should/could remain un-phased when observing someone else's raw grief? I have taken to writing about these experiences here and elsewhere (Woodthorpe, 2009) in order to help make sense of them



personally, and to share my mistakes and successes with my peers. What follows therefore is a sequential account of how I negotiated questions such as these before, during and after fieldwork, and what they might suggest about the academic pursuit of studying a place or group of people associated with death.

## **The Research Process**

### *Before the field*

As in common with many novice researchers, early on in the study and before entering the field (and with support from my supervisor) three tasks needed to be addressed, as each could impact on how I would interact and respond to participants. First, I had to ascertain the parameters and scope of the research. This was relatively straightforward in as much as the study was an analysis of participants' perceptions of the cemetery and what they perceived to be important in the site. The decision was therefore taken early on that the project would be an inductive piece of research shaped by a constructivist ontology. This was to be accompanied by an interpretive epistemological approach, in that the study was going to be *my* interpretation of participants' understanding(s) of the cemetery.

Leading on from this were questions about my methodological strategy. Again, this was comparatively uncomplicated; as an interpretation of the cemetery and the people associated with it, I wanted to be 'in' the setting rather than researching 'it' as an external reality (Geertz, 1974). Thus opting for an ethnographic approach, I drew heavily on the concept of intersubjectivity proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whereby one:

takes the perspective on man *as part of* his environment, not as separate from it. It focuses on constant interaction with the physical environment and with other people (229-230, emphasis added).

Necessitating that I would spend a lot of time in the cemetery, interacting with a wide range of bereaved people, this choice of method meant that I needed to be prepared to act overtly and covertly in the field, to become ‘part of’ the cemetery environment; watching, listening and asking questions (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Resulting from a caution from my supervisor, the third task before entering the cemetery for fieldwork concerned recognising some of the assumptions I already held about death and bereavement. In particular, this process of ‘disentanglement’ required time to consider how I felt about the soon-to-be daily routine of observing other people’s grief. At this stage, schooled in social research methods yet a relative novice in the undertaking of empirical research, I did not grasp the significance of this time to reflect before entering the field. It was during this period of contemplation however that I began to appreciate that it was not simply a matter of isolating my own feelings and experiences of death and grief from my research ambitions: I would automatically be bringing my experiences of death into the research and these would be part of the intersubjective process of producing insight and analysis. Looking back, this reflective period was an important phase of the study as I came to appreciate the way in which events in my teenage years – the sudden death of four people from my circle of friends in a car accident – could affect how I perceived other people’s behaviour when bereaved. At that time of the accident, I recalled how I had felt much frustration

at fellow classmates whom I thought were behaving ‘over the top’ in terms of their apparent uncontrollable weeping. At the same time though, I had struggled with the fact that other classmates showed little emotion. It was during my time thinking about what had happened that I realised that my task as a researcher was to extricate myself from these memories to ensure that they did not impact too profoundly on my perceptions of people’s grieving behaviour in the cemetery. But at the same time, I had to learn to accept that these memories would unavoidably shape the lens through which my interpretation of the cemetery would come (Kingdon, 2005).

### *In the field*

Typical of an ethnography, this project utilised participant observation and semi-structured interviews to generate data, dealt with in turn here. Widely considered to be one of the most revealing methods in ethnographic research (see Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), participant observation is based on the principle of immersion into the participants’ world in order to understand experiences and meanings from their perspective. Upon entering the field however, I discovered firsthand how dependent data generation from participant observation was on the extent to which I could manage my sense of scholarly detachment. For example, there were occasions I had to abandon covert participation/observation because I felt too deceptive in not fully revealing my presence; it was not uncommon for me to enter a section of the cemetery, begin to write field notes and then leave quickly afterwards because I did not want visitors in that section to think they were being ‘watched.’ On one occasion, an individual spent several hours with me walking around the cemetery grounds talking, in great detail, about the person who had died, their family and their circumstances. They also asked me lots of questions about my own experiences of

loss, which we talked about briefly; it was a wide ranging and relatively pleasant conversation. Not realising that this would happen I had not fully informed the individual of why I was in the cemetery at the outset of the conversation, the result of which meant that I felt I could not use what they had told me. To reveal that I was a researcher after the conversation ended would have (I thought at the time) been unethical as it may have been construed by the person that I was in some way 'leading them on'. On another occasion, a participant appeared to want 'answers' about whether I thought what they were doing (in terms of memorialisation – that is, the mementoes they were leaving at the site of the grave) was 'right'. The discussion that followed included my own thoughts on memorialisation and similarly never made it into the analysis – I felt that I had 'tainted' the conversation with my viewpoint, albeit one which the participant had requested. Certainly, moments such as these challenged my sense of what constituted critical distance and scholarly detachment when in the field. What implications, I began to wonder, did instances such as these have in terms of me being a thorough and accurate ethnographic researcher, immersed in the field?

Interviews were similarly challenging as I sought to manage what I revealed information about myself, how I interacted with participants, and whom I approached in the cemetery. Although I had prepared myself before entering the field by reading some well known texts (for example Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), I had not appreciated the potential nuances of the interview exchange. An example of a typical day in the field would involve speaking to visitors when they were in the café, or walking around the cemetery, by a grave, or in the Memorial Gardens - the area in CLCC allocated for distributing ashes. My sampling strategy was thus opportunistic, based on who was nearby in the site at the time. I would approach potential

participants and ask if they had a few moments to spare to take part in some academic research. Following a positive response, I would introduce myself and the project, and outline why I would like to speak with them. Most visitors I approached were willing to contribute, although the interview exchange varied greatly. For some, it was a very detailed, in-depth conversation that took over an hour, for others it was primarily a case of one word answers in an interview that lasted less than five minutes. Some people were very curious about the research, others showed little interest. Some were quite 'chirpy' in their responses, whereas others were more subdued. One or two told me, after a few questions, that they had said all that they wanted to say; others appeared to want the conversation to continue for as long as possible.

After a few weeks of this, my confidence grew in approaching visitors and asking them to participate in my project. This newfound buoyancy was brought into sharp relief however after an incident in the Memorial Gardens served to remind me of the challenge posed in interviewing people in this environment and why my reaction to what I encountered was so vital. On this occasion, I noticed a woman sitting on a bench in the Memorial Gardens. Startling her, I began my conventional foreword and request for her participation. It was only at that point that I noticed how distressed she was, as she declined to take part. Fraught with guilt I mumbled an apology and exited swiftly, feeling dreadful for interrupting her. My feelings of fault did not dissipate however and were to have a considerable influence on my further activities in the field as I became reluctant to approach anyone sitting on benches or in the Memorial Gardens. Their still, quiet contemplation was too difficult for me to handle as a young, novice researcher, and it felt far easier (and much more personally comfortable) to approach individuals who were tending to a grave or walking around the site. Not

wanting to intrude on other's private moments of grieving reflection, physical activity in the site thus became an observable signal to me that I could possibly approach someone.

Over time my reluctance to approach certain people became a great source of anxiety. Was I being methodical enough in how I asked visitors to participate? Was I skewing my sample with the people I felt confident in approaching? These uncertainties started to impact on fieldwork more generally, as I found myself gradually becoming more and more uneasy approaching and talking to visitors. What is more, my sense of critical distance from the topic under investigation was becoming compromised as I found it harder and harder to prevent myself from being moved when in the site. On some days observing children's graves or witnessing parents around my age attend a grave would move me to tears and render me 'out of action' for some time (at best half an hour, at worst the rest of the day). On one occasion I was so touched by a man's careful and concentrated nurturing of a flowerpot by a grave that I had to leave the cemetery for a short while. As time passed, incidents such as these progressed into an underlying concern that I was not maintaining the professional requirement of being a 'good' researcher, maintaining the all-so-important sense of accuracy and thoroughness. Thus although I continued to generate data through participant/observation and interviews it became more and more of a struggle as I grew evermore convinced that I was not meeting the "conventional image of a researcher [as]... someone who neutralizes his or her... viewpoints while conducting research" (Kleinman and Copp, 1993: 10). Certainly, I had not anticipated that I would have such potent emotional responses to my research topic. So it was with mixed feelings that after six months of being in the field I agreed with my supervisor

that I had enough data for the purpose of my thesis and could move into the analysis stage.

### *After the field*

As a novice researcher, at the point my supervisor agreed I could leave the field I had high hopes for the analytical phase of my project. Somewhat optimistically, I assumed that after the demands of the fieldwork stage the analytical process would be a more straightforward exercise that would principally involve perfunctory coding followed by the long process of writing up my thesis. I was looking forward to the feeling of committing words to paper, of getting my doctorate. Envisaging sitting in front of my computer with document after document of interview transcription and fieldnotes, I expected that the period after the field would be one of remote scrutiny, thinking through theories and applying them to the data I had generated. At this stage I had not fully appreciated how challenges related to detachment could continue to arise after the empirical data generation period (Hallowell et al, 2005; Roberts and Sanders, 2005).

Yet it was only once I was physically distanced from the site that I began to ponder the impact *I* had had on my research. As I sat in front of my computer screen, perhaps, I wondered, if I had not been beleaguered by feelings of insecurity would I have seen or done things differently when in the cemetery? Or, were my feelings of unease part of the research itself? Did they reveal something about the challenges posed by studying a site associated with death?

I have written elsewhere (Woodthorpe, 2009) about the realisation I had at this point, when I suddenly understood that I really *was* the lens through which all the data had been generated. This insight led me to (re)read my fieldnotes and interview transcripts with an appreciation of what I might learn from my *own* responses in the field. For example, in the aforementioned instance of the man attending to the flowerpot, rather than being preoccupied by my feelings of inadequacy upon vacating the site, I reflected on *why* I had been so profoundly moved. It was to do with his immediacy to the grave that gave his actions such significance (Gibson, 2004); the combination of the domestic tending and the buried body below made his commitment to maintaining that one little pot striking. A seemingly obvious deduction to make, this was something I had missed when distracted by my concerns about my ability to be a ‘good’ researcher. Similarly, the way in which I became distressed at seeing the graves of children who would have been the same age as me had they reached adulthood, or seeing parents my age, was connected with feeling compassion for my peer group. This was underpinned by an assumption that it was not ‘right’ that younger people should die or be bereaved, something that I had been made acutely aware of as a teenager when my classmates died. Lastly, the trigger of much of my anxiety – approaching the woman on the bench in the Memorial Gardens – was as a result of my assumption about the purpose of the cemetery, as a space of solitude and contemplation and not somewhere to be approached by an eager researcher with lots of questions to ask.

## **Discussion**



It was this series of realisations that made me suddenly profoundly aware of the significance of critical distance when researching a place or group of people associated with death. I had experienced death and grief in my life and was going to again in the future. Unless I become a recluse, this was (and is) an absolute certainty. I carried with me memories of grief and expectations about death in my future which had shaped the way I undertook the study. Surely, I thought, I could not be the only researcher studying people and places associated with death who had encountered this? Upon reading other reflexive accounts – and writing papers such as this and Woodthorpe (2009) - I discovered I was not (see Rowling, 1999; Valentine, 2007). But if maintaining a sense of scholarly detachment was so challenging how could I, or any other researcher for that matter, *ever* have a critical distance from a topic as universal as death? And why was this not acknowledged more frequently? To infer otherwise, were others not portraying an idealistic representation or impression of what it is like to study a place/people associated with death?

I have no doubt that some of the issues highlighted in this paper reflect the naivety that may come with the territory of being a novice researcher. However, the issues raised relate to broader questions about whether or not any researcher, novice or experienced, can – and would want to – intellectually detach themselves when examining death. The ‘great leveller’, unlike other topics that fellow social scientists investigate, death will touch *everyone* eventually – regardless of age, gender, income, geographical location and so on, including researchers. As Hertz (1907[1960]) pointed to one hundred years ago, as a topic of study death has the potential to blur the boundaries between the professional observer/researcher and the person-behind-the-researcher undertaking the research. Rather than ignore or conceal this blurring of

boundaries, the issue – I believe - becomes *the degree* to which the researcher working in this field acknowledges the experiences/anticipation of death that they bring with them to the research (Woodthorpe, 2009). In addition, it is *how* they accommodate this in the research process and the extent to which (and how) they choose to divulge it in research outputs (see Valentine, 2007). Some will chose not to include much reflection at all, or bury it in acknowledgement sections of books; others may be more open and forthright.

Those who are open and forthright are placing themselves in an uncertain position however. In divulging the challenges experienced in maintaining a sense of scholarly detachment (or not) such as I have here, there are implications for the researcher as they may make themselves vulnerable to accusations of prejudice and partiality; indeed, I am acutely aware that I may be exposing myself by admitting my fallibilities in this paper. One of the sources of this vulnerability is that, as Hedican (2006) has noted, currently there are few techniques to interrogate the more intangible parts of the research process, such as the researcher's memory and feeling, and how these impact on the data generated (see also Hallowell et al, 2005). This is due to the difficulty in 'pinning down' what might be considered insubstantial influences on research and the risk posed in suggesting that social research is based on sentiment rather than academic rigour and meticulousness. Nonetheless, if participant disclosure is what researchers are after (Birch and Miller, 2000; Dickson-Swift et al, 2006), then arguably researchers too need to be prepared to reveal how they reached their conclusions. My own research conclusions were reached at the same time as being transparent in papers such as this about whom I spoke to, how I recruited participants and making reference to the difficulties I had in the field.

Thus although this form of ‘intellectual honesty’ (Bloor and Wood, 2006) may necessarily leave a researcher open to challenge, to deliberately omit demanding facets of the research process – such as the struggle to maintain a sense of critical distance - may present an unrealistic and unattainable picture of social research. In the case of doing research related to death, it would also neglect that the topic under investigation is one that will *without doubt* impact on the researcher at some point in the future, if it has not done so already. Recalling the words of Douglas Davies cited earlier in this paper, “we are *all* participants in mortality, not just observers.” In addition, more generally and as has been indicated elsewhere (Cohen, 2000), the next generation of social researchers need to be aware of the challenges faced by their peers in order that they can learn from other’s mistakes (and successes). To imply that challenging encounters such as the ones recounted in this paper do not happen is to ensure that novice researchers are not prepared or equipped to face them; it keeps some of the more emotionally and intellectually demanding components of the social research process firmly in the closet.

The balance required then is to negotiate the act of disclosure while also upholding the credibility of the research process. Importantly, as Kleinmann and Copp (1993) have argued, it should not be assumed that showing human susceptibility is a sign of poor research quality. Susceptibility can also translate as receptivity; recognising the ability to *feel* while in the field can generate another layer of analytical insight (Hallowell et al, 2005; Woodthorpe, 2009).

Finally, the expectation that the researcher *can* disengage from their research topic may not only be idealistic, but also unworkable. When doing research associated with death, arguably a complete scholarly detachment or a sense of critical distance is *never* fully feasible. Furthermore, when researching a place or group of people associated with death, choosing *not* to publicly acknowledge the potential personal impact that the research may have on the researcher – and in turn what it may be influenced by - may leave subsequent analysis disconnected from the reality of the mortal human condition. Bearing this in mind – and the unassailable universal nature of death - for those who are wanting to undertake research related in this area, it is important to remember that you are *always* a part of it – whether in the field or not.

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<sup>1</sup> A readiness or unwillingness to disclose personal experience may be part of the researcher's disciplinary custom – for example it is much more widely accepted in social anthropology to critically reflect on how the self is shaped by cultural meaning (Geertz, 1974) and the ways in which the researcher interacts with the research environment, while it is not so popular in positivistic disciplines such as psychology, for example (Bloor and Wood, 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> Opened in 1856, the CLCC is one of the largest cemeteries in the UK at over two hundred acres, dealing with (on average) 3000 cremations and 1000 burials every year. At the time of the research, around 90 staff was employed at the site – a figure simply unheard of in other cemeteries around the country (for more detail about the CLCC, see Lambert, 2006).